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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: DRL DAS ERICA BARKS-RUGGLES DISCUSSES POLITICS,
PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PROGRAMMING WITH SAUDI WOMEN

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) Erica Barks-Ruggles met with dozens of Saudi women representing a broad spectrum of opinions and backgrounds during her September 12-14 visit to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi women unanimously agreed that Saudi tribal traditions are often wrongly portrayed as religious requirements, but disagreed on the degree of importance that religion plays in Saudi society and how it challenges the SAG's push for reforms. In prioritizing challenges for young women, the Saudi women said they believe equality in education and economic opportunities, self-confidence, self-esteem, and freedom of choice (in careers, family situation, and place of residence) are the most pressing needs. Even those who lived for years in the United States expressed fear of harassment in post-September 11 travel to the U.S. Some questioned the potential for problems with the increased number of Saudi students being sent to the U.S., but expressed support for exchange programs in general, and those involving high school students in particular. The women blamed the media for distorting the image of Saudi Arabia and the U.S. in each country. They identified U.S.-Saudi partnerships as extremely positive tools by which to improve the Saudi image in the U.S. END SUMMARY.

Culture vs. Religion-- Tribes Win Out

¶2. (C) During her three day visit to the Kingdom, DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles attended three "ladies' only" functions: two in Riyadh and one in Jeddah. In Riyadh, DAS Barks-Ruggles spent the first evening with a conservative, religious group of "average" Saudi women, and the second evening with a group of religious, yet more liberal and "elite," Saudi women. In Jeddah, Barks-Ruggles met with female members of the Chamber of Commerce and dined with openly liberal, reform-minded women, many of whom were long-time contacts and partners of the U.S. Consulate. The discussions at each of these functions heavily focused on politics, reform, and religion. The general consensus among all of the women was that cultural and tribal traditions have subsumed true Islam rules in governing family and daily life. They expressed that due to the predominant, historic, and deep-seated ties within tribal communities, reforms that go against the tribal grain must be undertaken slowly. They also agreed that King Abdullah is committed to change and has good intentions, but cautioned that it must continue at a measured pace and tribal and religious factions must be taken into account. If not, they warned, the pushback from both Saudi men and women, conservative and liberal alike, will stall progress. Only in Jeddah were the women willing to address what would happen if King Abdullah were unable to push reform forward in the medium to long-term. They admitted that without his leadership, the process might stall

and noted that the tempo for reform must take this into account.

13. (C) During the first meeting in Riyadh, the women considered themselves to be very religious, but cautioned that being "religious" should not be used as a metaphor for being "extremist." They emphasized that many of the rules governing their daily behavior were really the result of cultural exploitation of religion -- these rules are not mandated by Islam itself. They emphasized that women should have a choice as to how to conservatively they want to dress-- that this should be up to each person according to her comfort, faith, and family tradition. However, they said, since religion is the cornerstone of Saudi society, it must be respected and reforms implemented in accordance with it.

14. (C) The more elite women who participated in the second Riyadh meeting agreed, noting that suppression of women's rights is the result of exploitation of tribal tradition and not based on religion. They described a degree of liberalism in previous generations (often just 20-30 years ago) -- when women worked in the markets and the fields, did not cover their faces, attended schools, and even drove -- that does not currently exist in the Kingdom. They claimed, however, that the current generation's educational achievements will facilitate the push for reforms relating to women's rights. Nevertheless, "tribalists" and religious conservatives who are trying to keep a tight grip on traditional Saudi society are forcing cultural extremes to the surface. One woman in her twenties said that when she turned eighteen years old, her father took her to the courts to legally transfer his guardianship to her in order to grant her greater independence. The court refused, despite the fact that her mother and grandmother's generations had been successful in doing so.

15. (C) The Jeddah luncheon sparked a heated debate over tribal influence on Saudi society, with one woman exclaiming, "if I had a gun, I would use it to kill tribal leaders." This quote summed up the nature of the discussion: tribes are the root of evil-- their rule perpetuates the "backwardness" of Saudi society. The women disagreed only as to whether 75 or 99 percent of Saudi society fall under the conservative tribal rubric. Much of their anger towards tribal traditions was explained when they stated that tribal rule means they cannot be in any decision-making position. They stated that the only way the SAG's push for reform will be successful is if the tribal structure is co-opted into the effort. Then religious conservatives can be dealt with separately, because most reform efforts do not contradict Islam. One woman even stated, "tribes hijacked religion in Saudi Arabia and are the number one obstacle to reform." This group too, however, was hesitant on the pace of reform, with one participant summing up, "We do not want to lose our identity; don't want to be stereotyped. That will result in globalization that nobody wants. We need to find our own identity within our culture, and this takes time and understanding."

How to Win Over the U.S. Public and Alleviate Fear in Saudi Society

16. (C) The conversation during all events often strayed to the negative public image of America in Saudi Arabia and vice versa. Most women agreed that student scholarships for universities are a good idea because of the burgeoning youth population in Saudi Arabia and insufficient university capacity. Nevertheless, many of the women said they had refused to send their own children to study in the U.S. post-September 11, primarily due to fear of their being treated in an undignified manner during the visa process, at the port of entry, and/or during the period of study. They cited numerous personal and media accounts of such problems, while acknowledging that these cases did not represent the vast majority of positive visits by Saudis to the U.S. The

women worried about negative stereotypes of Saudis in the U.S. media and asked about ways to change these perceptions. Until these issues are effectively addressed, they speculated, scholarships and exchanges with the U.S. would not be able to fully reach their targets.

¶7. (C) When the subject turned to potential exchange programs, all were enthusiastic about possible future two-way exchanges of high school students. However, reactions varied among the groups: the women from Riyadh had a very different reaction than the women from Jeddah. Women based in Riyadh said that they would gladly host females in their homes as high school exchange students. They thought it would be a good way to demonstrate the positive aspects of Saudi society, and many said that, in their experience, western expatriate children very often had positive experiences and enjoyed their time in Saudi Arabia. They said, however, that they would not trust high school-aged boys around their daughters, so they would only accept girls into their households. Likewise, they said that they would only send their sons to the U.S. on high school exchange programs because they did not trust that their daughters would be safe. In Jeddah, however, the women had a very different reaction. They welcomed the idea of hosting both male and female high school students in their homes; three women even volunteered several times to open up their homes to potential students. The women then said that they would only send their daughters to the U.S. because they felt that only the girls were mature enough at that age to deal with possible problems in the States.

Building Bridges through Partnerships

¶8. (C) The women hailed as an example of how to improve U.S.- Saudi public images abroad the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) partnership on fighting breast cancer that was recently initiated in the Kingdom. DAS Barks-Ruggles discussed with physician and breast cancer patient Dr. Samia Amoudi the increasing awareness and prevention campaigns under the MEPI-sponsored partnership. They brainstormed on several awareness-raising activities, such as partnering with the Komen Foundation to increase distribution of at-home-testing educational materials and introducing awareness campaigns in local universities and young women's magazines. They agreed on the importance of partnerships with U.S. organizations to better facilitate the transfer of "know-how" in education and awareness efforts to Saudi women.

¶9. (C) DAS Barks-Ruggles also discussed potential partnerships with an HIV/AIDS activist. She suggested to Dr. Sanaa Filemban using World AIDS Day as a launch pad for increased awareness effort-- possibly in partnership with U.S.-sponsored programs. They brainstormed on possible guest speakers to raise awareness of the increasing number of AIDS patients in the Kingdom. Currently, all immigrant workers, prisoners, military personnel, and surgery patients are tested, and most pregnant women and private company employees are also tested for HIV. Issues such as 'temporary marriages' (officially sanctioned marriages performed under pre-set conditions, such as limited length of marriage and "support" stipulations), drug abuse, and commercial sex workers increase stigmatization in Saudi Arabia.

¶10. (C) Potential partnerships with the College of Business Administration (CBA), where MEPI is currently supporting a "Women in Technology (WIT)" program, were also discussed. CBA is currently attempting to conduct student council elections this semester -- only the second time this has occurred. WIT Project Director Dr. Ala'a told DAS Barks-Ruggles that the students, who are unfamiliar with democratic principles, are in need of assistance. She requested an information exchange between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that increased partnership with students would improve their perceptions of the U.S., which are faltering due to consistent, negative media exposure.

¶11. (C) Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) representatives spoke at length with DAS Barks-Ruggles about the need to empower Saudi women relative to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as under the World Trade Organization (WTO). They requested partnership support for conducting workshops on the rights of women under WTO accession and also to train women on lobbying and negotiating skills. DAS Barks-Ruggles suggested it may make sense for them and other women to participate in civil society discussions on the margins of the U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue, and the JCCI women were enthusiastic about the possibility. They requested U.S. assistance in lobbying for such inclusion and offered to lobby the SAG as well. They also shared their negative experience with the International Labor Organization in Riyadh, which canceled a meeting with the women of the JCCI on women's issues and instead met only with the male members of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce. They expressed hope that this situation would not be repeated and said that, with more expertise in lobbying, they would be able to prevent such incidents in the future.

¶12. (U) This cable has been cleared by DAS Barks-Ruggles.
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